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SUBJECT: Background of Recent Fujian Chemical Plant Protests

REF: 07 Guangzhou 1297 and previous

¶1. (U) Summary: Fears that a proposed chemical plant could endanger their livelihood spurred approximately 10,000 residents of Dongshan Island, Fujian Province, to protest the project, according to media reports. The protests, which began February 29 and culminated in the vandalism of local government buildings and clashes with police three days later, were possibly timed to coincide with National People's Congress (NPC) and National People's Political Consultative Conference (NPPCC) meetings in Beijing. A government-imposed media blackout and the deployment of armed police could signal officials' growing impatience with grassroots activism. End Summary.

A Tale of Two Cities

¶2. (U) Confronted by organized protests from residents of Xiamen (reftel), the Fujian Provincial Party Committee decided in late 2007 to move a proposed massive paraxylene (PX) chemical plant to Zhangpu County's Gulei Peninsula. Though peninsula residents will receive compensation for the effects of the project, residents of Dongshan Island, which is located 10 miles from the peninsula, will not, according to the Taiwan-based United Daily News. The Dongshan economy relies heavily on fishing and tourism, and residents are concerned that discharges from the PX plant could destroy their livelihood.

Media Suppression

¶3. (U) The timing of the protests could have been intended to raise awareness of Dongshan residents' plight, considering that Fujian provincial leaders were in Beijing to attend the NPC and NPPCC. The United Daily News reported that Fujian authorities had sought to mitigate the impact of the protests by imposing a media blackout. Post confirmed that nearly all online discussions regarding the protests had been removed from the internet, and it appears that no domestic media have featured stories about the incident.

Comment: The Future of Environmental Activism?

¶4. (U) Violence and injury notwithstanding, the Dongshan protests have highlighted the effectiveness of activists in mobilizing broad demographics in grassroots environmental-protection campaigns. If the Dongshan protests prove successful, environmental activists would doubtless be emboldened, and would likely expand their operations. (A petrochemical plant planned for the Nansha area south of Guangzhou has the potential to become the target of such protests, though as yet there have been no indications of opposition.) However, the government's use of traditional tactics

-- including media blackouts and the deployment of baton-wielding police -- suggests growing official inflexibility, especially after the government's public defeat in Xiamen.

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